

### Reflections on a Post-Qualitative Inquiry With Children/Young People: Exploring and Furthering a Performative Research Ethics

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## Reflections on a Post-Qualitative Inquiry With Children/Young People: Exploring and Furthering a Performative Research Ethics

*Norma R.A. Romm*

### Key words:

Belmont report  
revised;  
children as co-  
inquirers;  
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responsibility,  
Indigenous  
research  
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as becoming;  
relational  
sampling;  
relational knowing;  
research as  
performative;  
social justice;  
ecological justice;  
ethics

**Abstract:** In this article I discuss a number of ethical issues surrounding the USA-commissioned Belmont report (NATIONAL COMMISSION FOR THE PROTECTION OF HUMAN SUBJECTS OF BIOMEDICAL AND BEHAVIORAL RESEARCH, 1979), using as one of the spurs for my discussion a case of post qualitative research with ten (Black) children aged 14-15 in a school in South Africa. I asked the children to form groups to reflect together on the possible relevance for South Africa of certain scenarios in relation to climate change that had been constructed during research in Australia. The "scenario exercise" was intended to stimulate the participants' active learning together in relation to their engagement with the scenarios. It was also intended to be consciously "performative" in that the words used in the presented scenarios would admittedly have some impact on the children's (joint) considerations, for which I took some responsibility. With reference to this research, and at the same time engaging with ongoing ethical debates related to the purpose of social scientific inquiry, I offer ethical deliberations which entail a radical revision of the ethical guidelines of the Belmont report (which inform many institutional ethical review boards across the globe) to incorporate a performative understanding of social research. While I concentrate on addressing ethical issues concerning research interaction with children/young people, I suggest that my deliberations have implications for participatory research with adults too.

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## 1. Introduction

In this article I engage with literature on research ethics—in particular, research ethics pertaining to participatory qualitative research—by referring, *inter alia*, to a research encounter between myself and ten children/young people<sup>1</sup> (aged 14-15) from a Grade 9 Geography class in a particular school in South Africa (2018). My ethical considerations amount to a reconfiguration of the medically informed proposals put forward in the Belmont report (NATIONAL COMMISSION FOR THE PROTECTION OF HUMAN SUBJECTS OF BIOMEDICAL AND BEHAVIORAL RESEARCH, 1979), so as to provide for post-qualitative inquiries which appreciate the performative function of social research. My suggestions are based not only on the claim that "qualitative inquiry" is insufficiently catered for in the report (as, for example, highlighted by VAN DEN HOONAARD, 2018, §6f.), but that, as importantly, provision needs to be made for *post*-qualitative inquiry which is intentionally performative (and transformative-oriented) and which also respects Indigenous styles of relational knowing. VAN DEN HOONAARD is (rightfully) disquieted that the medical ethics codes embraced by the report and which are still highly influential in the ethical deliberations of many Institutional Review Boards (IRBs), are "inhospitable to social science research" (§9). His concerns are similar to those of OLIVIER and FISHWICK (2003), who point out that the "traditional biomedical ethics model may not always be appropriate in evaluating qualitative proposals [as evaluated by ethics IRBs]" (Abstract). OLIVIER and FISHWICK feel that there is (much) room for "discussion and debate around ethical considerations in qualitative work" (§14) and that part of this debate needs to include critically engaging with the "commonly applied biomedical ethics model for qualitative research" (§3). [1]

VAN DEN HOONAARD, along with OLIVIER and FISHWICK, argues that the medical model of the Belmont report, and the tendency of IRBs to rely on this model across the board, is particularly restrictive for qualitative research, and does not offer researchers leeway to make ethical decisions in the light of the social context of the research (either in selecting participants or in relating to them during the research process). That is, the report with its three principles of "respect for persons" (issuing in advice on how to seek "consent"), "beneficence" (weighing risks of harm against benefits accrued through scientific knowledge improvement), and "justice" (fairness in selection of subjects/participants so as to protect "vulnerable groups") (NATIONAL COMMISSION, 1979, pp.4-6), can

1 HILL (2006) makes the point that although UN Convention on the Rights of the Child considers that people below the age of 18 are children, "many children regard themselves as young people" (p.85). NOROZI and MOEN (2016) make a similar point when they refer to childhood as a social construction. They note that: "Treating childhood as a social construct, social constructionists have argued that there are many possible answers to the question: what is a child?" (p.75) HONKANEN, POIKOLAINEN and KARLSSON (2018) indicate that in their co-research with various ages of children/young people, they "define[d] children as under 13-year-olds, and older than that as young people. This definition is based on the research of the Finnish Youth Research Society in which children of various ages were asked whether they experience themselves as children or as young people" (p.188).

2 As BROOKS, TE RIELE and MAGUIRE (2014) put it, "with some modifications, these principles have informed the development of guidelines for researchers across disciplines and countries" (p.30).

become stifling for researchers doing/proposing qualitative research. VAN DEN HOONARD (2018) points out that from the Belmont report's perspective the protection of marginalised social groupings was meant to mitigate against such people's being subject to the *physical* harm that could arise from medical experimentation, but has since been applied to a variety of harms that are considered as possibly relevant in social scientific research—for example, emotional and social harm. The groups of people considered as needing particular protection are: "children, old people, the disabled, captive populations such as prisoners, sick folks, Holocaust survivors, and so on" (§24). A paternalistic attitude on the part of IRBs, linked with "imaginary qualities" that are supposed to be associated with people's being "vulnerable" (such that they need protection from participation in social inquiry) means that their voices and views concerning their social positioning are often left unexplored (ibid.). [2]

VAN DEN HOONARD offers various suggestions, such as considering "professional codes and membership in relevant associations" for various fields in the social sciences, as a way to bypass the "authority of the ethics regime" (§41). In this article I make the point that whether IRBs can be re-organised to cater for qualitatively directed research processes (for example, by inviting diverse members with different conceptions onto the boards<sup>3</sup>) or whether it is professional bodies who are better equipped to appreciate diverse conceptions of research, what is important is that *the considerations of those who advocate a more transformative research stance also need to be kept on the agenda for discussion*. [3]

Various post-qualitative-oriented authors (e.g. AUSTIN, 2015; BUBAR & MARTINEZ, 2017; CASTRO-REYES et al., 2015; MERTENS, 2012) have queried the Belmont report on the grounds that the definition of "scientific investigation" in the report does not take into account epistemological and related ethical considerations that have been forwarded by those who regard research as a *future-forming enterprise* (which can contribute consciously to the unfolding of social realities, which are seen as in-the-making). Furthermore, various Indigenous authors (propounding an Indigenous paradigm for social research) suggest that dominant conceptions of research (including in the qualitative tradition) still perpetuate understandings of research as what CRAM (2019) calls "racially biased ways of knowing" (p.1514). CRAM suggests that the result has been the exclusion/subjugation of "other non-White epistemologies" (ibid.). CRAM's critique (writing from a Maori perspective) is not only that "qualitative research" needs to be better accounted for in ethical discussions, but that *the very definition of "knowing" needs to be revisited*. NDIMANDE (2018), writing

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3 MARTINO and SCHORMANS (2018) refer to the problem of good intentions backfiring when, for example, IRBs invoke disabling (medically based) assumptions in relation to people labelled as having "intellectual disabilities" (Abstract). Their suggestion is that in the light of the prevalence of the reductive medical model, there is a "need to have a *more diverse committee membership* that can better address different types of research methods and projects" (§10, emphases added). Significantly, they believe that such diversity will also bring to the agenda "the adoption of a more critical and emancipatory approach ... [which] might work to re-shape ethics procedures and decisions" (§9). Put differently, they suggest that it is important to introduce into ethics committee discussion more "transformative" approaches, and they feel that more "diverse" membership could help to forward such discussions.

about his research undertaken in relation to teacher education in South Africa, similarly argues that:

"[r]esearch methods such as surveys, interviews, and ethnographic studies are historically rooted within the nexus of European imperialism and colonialism (Smith, 1999). However, today there is a growing number of international scholars who ... call for decolonising traditional research assumptions and methods. These scholars argue that researchers need to embrace new ways of thinking about knowledge and knowledge production" (p.384). [4]

As described below, the Belmont report takes as "given" that professional researchers must design research scientifically towards seeking improvements in the (scientific) body of knowledge. This notion of knowledge-production remains unquestioned by many social scientific researchers, including those who recognise the worth of qualitative research (e.g. HAMMERSLEY, 2009, 2010). In my discussion I offer proposals concerning how the Belmont report's principles might become reconfigured in the practice of research with children (young people) and indeed with adults, to cater for what can be labelled as "performative-oriented" research in the broad sense of the term (as I explain in Section 2), which includes *post-qualitative*, *transformative*, and *Indigenous paradigms* for research. The article is not directed to offering an exposition of the "results" of the research approach (which I have proffered in another forum).<sup>4</sup> [5]

As part of my discussion, I reconsider the Belmont report's guidelines for weighing up potential "risks" to participants and "benefits" (to participants and/or society) that might be accrued through scientific investigations. I suggest that focusing attention on risks and benefits is less promising (for qualitative social inquiry) than *redefining the process of research so that it is set up performatively to facilitate knowing as co-creation*. In this case a learning encounter was triggered through my asking the children to collaborate with peers and with myself (as presenter of the scenarios) in a co-inquiry process. I explain how I tried to present the research as a mutual learning encounter, in which the participants could learn from each other and from engagement with the supplied scenarios, while I too could learn from them. The notion of collectively generating ideas and visions (through relational knowing) resonates with what is called *Ubuntu* (as a way of knowing and living) in the African context (CHILISA, 2012, 2017; LE GRANGE, 2018; LETSEKA, 2012; MSILA, 2017; QUAN-BAFFOUR, ROMM & McINTYRE-MILLS, 2019). It also resonates with many other authors' accounts of (relational) research as a process of what JONES (2017) calls "assembling a 'we'" through the research process (p.131), what KUBY and CHRIST (2019) term "us-ing" (p.1), GERGEN (2009) names a "relational achievement" (p.203), or what ROTH describes as knowing (and acting) as a transaction between people, rather than being individually situated (2018, §10). [6]

4 WEBSTER et al. (2019) similarly mention that: "This chapter [of theirs] shares a study of Aboriginal people's stories of diabetes care. It is a collaborative story told by four Aboriginal Health Workers and two non-Aboriginal researchers *which focuses on methodology rather than findings*" (p.1565, emphases added). In this case, I focus on the ethical aspects of the methodology (where methodology is seen as embracing ethical and epistemological positions that underpin the use of "method").

HWANG and ROTH (2005) for their part suggest that:

"particularly in research on learning, some researchers have not resigned to describing and interpreting their phenomena but proactively dealt with issues emerging from the mutually constitutive researcher/researched relationship. They thereby value research not only for producing knowledge [as relational encounter] but also for contributing to human development and improving the human condition (e.g., critical ethnography [ANDERSON, 1989], participatory action research [KYLE, 1997])" (§1). [7]

I indicate in the article that in the case which I discuss, the research concerned the children's school learning about environmental awareness and possibilities for action—which would render HWANG and ROTH's considerations above applicable; but I suggest that indeed all research (with children and with adults) *can be presented to participants as a process of mutual exploration (learning)*. I also make the point that instead of focusing only on "improving the human condition", we can focus on improving an *inclusive wellbeing*, which includes the wellbeing of nature. As shown via the example discussed, concerns with social justice can be extended to concerns with ecological justice (ARKO-ACHEMFUOR, ROMM & SEROLONG, 2019; CHILISA, 2017; McINTYRE-MILLS, 2014a, 2017; MUROVE, 2005; OSUJI, 2018; ROMM, 2017, 2018; STEPHENS, TAKET & GAGLIANO, 2019; WIRAWAN & McINTYRE-MILLS, 2019). [8]

Regarding my positionality, it should be noted that I am (defined as) White South African in terms of the apartheid government's designation of South Africa's racialised groups (1948), but I regard myself as what I call "Indigenous-oriented" in that the ethical guidelines of the Indigenous research paradigm (as forwarded by authors such as CHILISA, 2012; KOVACH, 2009; SMITH, 1999) resonate with my understandings of how the research space should be used. Like many other authors (e.g., CHERRINGTON, 2015; CHILISA, 2012; CRAM & MERTENS, 2016; DENZIN & LINCOLN, 2008; HELD, 2019; KOVACH, 2009; LE GRANGE, 2018; MIDGLEY et al., 2007; RIX, WILSON, SHEEHAN & TUJAGUE, 2019), I recognise opportunity for those classed as "non-Indigenous" and "Indigenous" to "negotiate solidarity" across transformative (performative-oriented) and Indigenous paradigms when it comes to ways of envisioning research (CRAM & MERTENS, 2016). The research in this case was mindfully directed at inputting into what ST. PIERRE (2019) in her vision of post-qualitative research calls "things in the making" (p.3), where the quest is not to try to "find out" about experiences, views, or social processes existing "in" social reality, but to appreciate that the research process is part of the emergence of worlds in becoming. [9]

The article is structured as follows: In Section 2, I offer some considerations around research as a performative enterprise. In Section 3, I refer to some arguments around attempts to conduct what is called "child-centred" research: I review them critically in the light of a performative stance and I offer suggestions for rather conceiving research with children (as with adults) as *relation-centred*. I then proceed (Section 4) to hone in on my involvement with the particular school

(in South Africa) and how the research encounter with the children arose. In Section 5, I offer some detail on my way of explicating the research to the children as a learning encounter, and how this panned out. Section 6 reports on what the children stated (to me) that they had learned, and my commentary to them. In Section 7, I offer a brief account of my "feedback" to the geography teacher, and his response. In Section 8, I turn in detail (with reference to the example) to the three principles of the Belmont report and I offer proposals for reconfiguring them, not only in relation to participatory research with children in terms of a performative stance, but with adults too. [10]

## 2. Considerations Around Research as Performative

In ROTH's (2006) discussion of collective responsibility, he suggests that the way in which (professional) researchers interact with participants invariably will have some consequences for the unfolding of participant responses, albeit that we can never know how the participants will complete the "moves" (§29) being made. In whatever way our "moves" which we initiate may become interpreted (and acted upon) we need to take *some responsibility* for their possible impact (as part of a collective responsibility in which participants are also complicit). ROTH explains that, as he sees it, "I am responsible for others and their actions as well as for my own self and my actions" (§15) and that "in this way of thinking, human beings are responsible for the other" (§16). In the research as recounted in this article (Sections 4-7), I took some responsibility for the choice of scenarios which were to become triggers for discussion around possible responses to climate change. These scenarios were chosen in that they were originally derived from Aboriginal-based research in Australia, and later further applied in interactive research with residents in a region of South Australia (McINTYRE-MILLS, 2014a, 2014b; ROMM, 2018). The research with the children was thus oriented to triggering discussion in relation to supplied scenarios, which were themselves admittedly not neutral in content (as seen from [Appendix](#)). As DENZIN (2001) reminds us, in setting out his outline of a performative social science, "words matter" in that they come to have a "material presence in the world" (p.24). I appreciated that the words used in the scenarios could influence the children's/young people's continuing discourses (and understandings of action) and that the research "results" would not be representing a pre-given world of meanings (as if this is ever possible). [11]

This conception of the research process as what GERGEN (2015) summarises as "world making" rather than striving to be "world mirroring" (p.287), is of course contentious. The "positivist perspective" (VAN DEN HOONAARD, 2018, §6) which pervades the Belmont report and which implies a representational view of what "knowledge-seeking" amounts to, is still dominant in IRB ethics discussions (§11) and, as I argued in my Introduction, "qualitative research" does not necessarily break with representational accounts of "knowing". (Even professional social scientific associations, which might support "social science" research as distinct from natural scientific inquiry, may not necessarily revision this conception of knowing—which is so pervasive in Western-oriented thinking, as noted by many Indigenous scholars.) Hence discussion around beneficence, for example,

still becomes a matter of considering risks and benefits associated with the quest for "scientific" knowledge production. The authors of the Belmont report state that the application of this principle in practice involves different types of decision making for investigators, review committees, and prospective subjects/participants:

"For the investigator, it is a means to examine whether the proposed research is properly designed. For a review committee, it is a method for determining whether the risks that will be presented to subjects are justified. For prospective subjects, the assessment will assist the determination whether or not to participate" (NATIONAL COMMISSION, 1979, p.8). [12]

For investigators, according to this formulation, their role is to ensure that the study is well designed so that it can indeed contribute to the "development of knowledge" (p.5). Risk-benefit analysis is also to be undertaken by the relevant review committees, whose main concern is that an adequate account of risks and benefits (in the form of knowledge accrual) is presented to prospective participants. Risk-benefit considerations as far as the participants are concerned, is related to the prospective participant's decision on the basis of the information at their disposal as to whether or not to give consent to participate in the "scientific" knowledge-production process. [13]

In reconfiguring the Belmont report's principles in this article (Section 8), I am not merely making the point that ethical regulation by IRBs is problematic in that it does not afford social scientific researchers sufficient initiative for making ethical decisions suited to qualitative research. My concerns relate to my understanding that many qualitative researchers still adhere to the definition of social science as "science". A case in point is the argument of HAMMERSLEY and TRAIANO (2014) who are critical of the regulatory manner in which IRBs generally operate, but do not—as I do in this article—try to undercut the definition of knowledge as provided in the Belmont report; nor do they question the idea that the role of professional researcher is first and foremost the "production of knowledge" (§6.2). That is, they do *not* concur with authors such as DENZIN and GIARDINA (2007, 2009), DENZIN and LINCOLN (2008), JONES (2017), MERTENS (2009, 2010, 2012), MERTENS, HARRIS and HOLMES (2009), SMITH (2005), ST. PIERRE (2017, 2019), and STEPHENS (2015), who have tried to introduce alternative goals for social research practice, such as goals of forwarding a more caring and just society. [14]

HAMMERSLEY and TRAIANO (2014) argue that one of the reasons for not including such goals is that the concepts of "care" and "justice" are too contested to serve as a basis for judging the worth of social research. They aver that in any case "social researchers are not in a privileged position to determine what would and would not count as justice, in other words to interpret what this essentially contested concept implies for particular cases" (§4.10). Regarding the question of including care as a research ethic, they state that research is not a caring profession as such, and that researchers should not consider their obligations as including attempts to "pursue or realise justice and care" (§6.1). Researchers



should concentrate on the goal of research, which as they see it is to "*produce sound knowledge*" (§6.2, emphases added). [15]

But manifestly what is in dispute here is whether "sound knowledge" should be defined as striving for "the truth" (seen as representation of a posited outside world) and whether the binary distinction between "researchers" and "researched" holds at all. Post-qualitative inquirers, along with a myriad of Indigenous and transformation-oriented authors, question this binary and argue that framings of questions and words used in the research process willy-nilly impact on discourses in social life, and are never innocent in their social consequences. Researchers are therefore "obligated" (ROTH, 2006, §29) to try to make moves which are likely to contribute to (more) promising futures (through the way in which they invite responses and in the way they solicit ethical discussions about futures).<sup>5</sup> This does not mean that researchers need to "determine what will count as justice" (HAMMERSLEY & TRAIANOU, 2014, §4.10). It means that the research can be set up to invite discussion around this. A performative stance—as detailed with reference to the example used in Sections 4-7 below—does not shy from the "obligation" to consider, with others, the impact of research on the social (and ecological) worlds of which it is a part. [16]

When I use the word "performative" as offering counterpoint to research aimed at "world-mirroring" (GERGEN, 2015, p.287), I am taking up (and continuing to explore through continued ethical discussion) GERGEN and GERGEN's (2011) argument that a performative stance is "frequently based on a social constructionist, metatheory, [where] supporters reject a realist, or mapping view of representation, and explore varieties of expressive forms for constructing worlds relevant to the social sciences" (Abstract). GERGEN and GERGEN go on to note that "the term 'performative' is drawn from J.L. AUSTIN's work, 'How to do Things with Words' (1962), in which he refers to the way in which utterances perform various social functions over and above conveying content" (§1). [17]

What I take from this, following GERGEN and GERGEN, is that "words" *bring forth*—rather than describe or "represent"—constructed realities. As BARINAGA (2009) notes, in setting out her performative understanding of the function of language, there are still implicit (but pervasive) assumptions in our (Western?) culture, that are "not always easy to unveil and hence these influence our research without us suspecting it" (§1). One such assumption "concerns the nature of language and its relationship to reality" (ibid.). The assumption is that somehow our language (especially propositional language) should be aimed at bringing about a correspondence between "words" and "reality". Having suggested that language should not be treated as "representing" realities, GERGEN and GERGEN (2011) point out that the distinction between what is traditionally called "science" (as an effort at world-representation) and

5 As far as power relations in the research process and wider social nexus is concerned, the implication hereof is that, as discussed by GALLAGHER (2008, p.143), power is not treated as a "commodity" of which some people (e.g. researchers in relation with research participants) "have" more or less. GALLAGHER considers implications of this for research work with children, while FLOOD and ROMM (2018) offer a more general exposition of how power can become differently treated and enacted in social relations.

"art/theatre" (as expressive of the artists/dramatists' sharing of concerns/values/emotions/imagination) becomes fuzzy. They note that in a sense all "methods of inquiry ... are performances" (§3) and the question then becomes how "methods" can be used to "serve social ends" (ibid.). In other words, the ethical question is not how we can try to do (social) science such that we can "uncover" realities, but more a question of how we can practice research in a way that is fruitful for serving what are taken to be desired "ends". For those who still consider a clear distinction between "science" and "art", they remark that:

"[i]n philosophy the distinction between science and art has long been questioned, with scholars pointing to the various ways in which scientific theory and descriptions are suffused with literary tropes (e.g. metaphors, narratives), and guided by visual imagery (e.g., waves, matrices)" (§4). [18]

Although GERGEN and GERGEN proceed to discuss ways in which forms of inquiry such as theatre, art, poetry etc., have been used in the social sciences, my focus in this article is on how *any* form of inquiry is performative in the sense that the way of doing the research (and the relationship with participants and wider audiences) arguably *makes some kind of intervention in the flow of events*. I therefore suggest that a performative ethical stance takes this into account and does not shy from consciously "intervening". As DENZIN (2001) notes, interviews can already make a difference to the unfolding of worlds in that the words used come to have a presence in the world. Likewise, SCHMALENBACH, in her (ethnographic) research in a school setting in a community in Mexico, after conversing with Donna MERTENS at a conference, realised that she could consciously invoke a transformative paradigm (as well as an Indigenous perspective, which cautions against "deficit" discourses, SCHMALENBACH & KIEGELMANN, 2018, §30). SCHMALENBACH notes that Donna had encouraged her to "look for strengths by focusing on the survival strategies that participants were using to get through their daily [and challenging] lives" (SCHMALENBACH & KIEGELMANN, 2018, §30). Henceforward she started applying this non-deficit-oriented approach "more consciously to the interviews and conversations I had in the field" (ibid.). By directing the interviews in this way, she took responsibility for her use of "words" during the conversations (which in turn met with positive response from the participants). The "data" that became generated through the encounters were a product of these interactions—including many others, for example, through her "looking for intersections in which different groups of participants had the space to share their points of view with others" (§53). [19]

KIEGELMANN, her supervisor (situated in Germany, but now co-writing with SCHMALENBACH about their reflections on the project in their joint article) notes that "by taking an empowering stance towards all members in the field she met, she also influenced these members *by making their voices heard*" (SCHMALENBACH & KIEGELMANN, 2018, §59, emphases added). I would underline that what was as important was that she did not just "make their voices heard"—but also *contributed to offering ideas* that could be "empowering". SCHMALENBACH herself notes that: "At the same time I have noticed that it is possible to carefully bring novel ideas to the field that facilitate the development

of new (and perhaps additional) survival strategies" (SCHMALENBACH & KIEGELMANN, §56). This would be more consistent with a post-qualitative, transformative and Indigenous perspective where it is understood that there is a *reciprocal relationship* in the research process and that research is not a matter of "extracting" voices. This would also be consistent with NDIMANDE's (2018) point that research methods can be deployed/re-tuned in "decolonising" style, which breaks with prevalent Western views of using research to "find out" perspectives independently of the *relational encounter in which "knowing" between selves-in-relation is developed*. For me, then, a performative ethical stance can be defined as one which acknowledges that research is not to be considered as a world-mirroring exercise, but as a potentially world-shaping one, and which operates accordingly "in the field". (It does not need to be associated with dramaturgical performances, although of course these can also be part of the inquiry repertoire, as detailed in GERGEN and GERGEN, 2012.) [20]

A performative ethical stance—as defined broadly here—implies a different understanding of so-called child-centred research, towards what I prefer to call *relation-centred research*, when doing research with children (which can be extended to doing research with any sets of participants). In the next section I refer to developments in what some authors call (participatory) child-centred research and I indicate how this can be re-conceptualised, with implications for ethical practice. [21]

### 3. Child-Centred or Relation-Centred Research?

PUNCH (2002) notes that authors who propound the importance of "child-centred" (p. 337) research, have put forward arguments to the effect that (participatory) methods for conducting research with children should be "based on children's skills" (p.322). She points out that "this has led to a plethora of innovative or adapted techniques being developed, such as pictures and diaries ..., sentence completion and writing ..., drawings ..., the draw and write technique ..., and radio workshops" (ibid.). She states that whatever methods do become used (for research with children and indeed with adults) what is crucial is that in the process of doing the research, researchers should not "impose" their perceptions. As she puts it:

"A common concern for qualitative research with adults or children is not to impose the researcher's own views and to enable the research subjects to express their perceptions freely. The difference for research with children is that it is difficult for an adult researcher ever to totally understand the world from a child's point of view" (pp.324-325). [22]

She considers that what constitutes a specific challenge in research with children is that

"children are not used to expressing their views freely or being taken seriously by adults because of their position in adult dominated society. The challenge is how best to enable children to express their views to an adult researcher and how to maximise

children's ability to express themselves at the point of data-gathering; enhancing their willingness to communicate and the richness of the findings" (p.325). [23]

Another potential challenge which she locates is that "when eliciting children's views, ... child researchers ... are often asked if they can 'really believe' children's accounts of their experiences" (ibid.). A common assumption, she notes, is that children are more likely than adults to "say what they think the researcher wants to hear" (ibid.). Whereas this may be the same for adults (the so-called social desirability effect), she notes that "the difference is that children are potentially more vulnerable to the unequal power relationship between child subjects and adult researchers" (p.328; as pointed out by many of those trying to conduct child-centred inquiries). [24]

She argues that this is because "the nature of childhood in adult society means that children are used to having to try to please adults, and they may fear adults' reactions to what they say" (ibid.). Her suggestion is that to work towards "validity" (p.325) of findings, appropriate methods should be adopted and ways of interacting/relating with children (as with adults) should be aimed at enabling participants to express their views/perspectives/experiences. She emphasises that while "using methods which are ... sensitive to children's particular competencies or interests can enable children to feel more at ease with an adult researcher" (p.330), this does not mean that children are "incapable of engaging with the methods used in research with adults" (ibid.). Overall, her position is that researchers need to be sensitive to the context, but that this is *also the case with research with adults* and that "the methodological issues which have been discussed are all relevant to research with adults and children. However, these issues are potentially different or particularly pertinent to the way research is conducted with children" (ibid.). Hence she advises that "researchers need to be critically aware of the range of reasons why research with children may be potentially different from research with adults" (p.338). This is not so much due to differences "in" children (relative to adults), but more "because many of the reasons underlying potential differences stem from children's marginalised position in adult society" (ibid.). [25]

As can be gathered from PUNCH's arguments, she sees the movement for child-centred research as linked to the quest to try to achieve "validity" (p.325), defined as getting to grips with children's experiences, views and perspectives, by, for example, making them feel "at ease" (p.330) during the research process. This, she notes, is no different from the quest to increase validity in qualitative research with adults, so that their answers reflect their perspectives. [26]

In MAGUIRE's (2005) deliberations around research with children (in this case bilingual and multilingual ones) she too underscores that child-centred participatory research with children points to the "importance of listening to their voices and making a commitment to understand their perspectives and social worlds as they do" (§5). She states that "after several decades of doing research *with* [as opposed to *on*] young bilingual children I am convinced that they can be competent and valuable 'informants'" (ibid.). She points to what she calls the

"growing interest" among ethnographic and qualitative researchers ... in working with children" instead of treating them as "faceless objects and voiceless vulnerable victims of research" (§6). She cites JAMES (2001) who describes how the use of, for example, ethnographic research with children has shown up "a view of children as competent interpreters of their social worlds" (MAGUIRE, 2005, §6). But she laments that "expectations about children's agency, competence and participation in research are slow to change" (§7). She advocates discussions around "what it means in practice to listen to their voices and nurture their capacity to participate in research" (§11). She suggests that this necessitates that research ethics policy makers and researchers "face the challenge of entering children's worlds and discovering appropriate child-centred ways of interpreting their competence and perspectives" (ibid.). She expresses concern (§12) about the "ethics and politics of including and excluding young children in human inquiry" (as, for example, advised by many IRBs—as I noted in the Introduction). [27]

Altogether, she calls for participatory research which is geared to "ensuring their voices are listened to, heard, appreciated and understood" (§16). In similar vein to PUNCH (2002), she notes that one of the challenges confronted in the process of research with children stems from "issues of power" such that it may be difficult for adult researchers to "find acceptance within children's worlds, from their perspectives" (MAGUIRE, 2005, §24). She suggests that one way to address this challenge is to "learn to interview and understand children by actually engaging with them in meaningful conversations" (§26). [28]

When discussing the question of "risks and benefits" (§27) (as introduced in the Belmont Report, NATIONAL COMMISSION, 1979, p.5), MAGUIRE (2005) points to how a "dialogical theory of language" offers potential to

"seeing children and adults *jointly constructing knowledge and understanding* through participation in meaningful activities and quality interactions with self and others in particular contexts. From a sociocultural perspective then both children and adults act as resource for each other and assume varying roles and responsibilities in decision making. Again, from a dialogic perspective, this then necessitates researchers' well-established communicative and linguistic competence, commitment to respecting children's rights and care in nurturing their well-being" (§29, emphases added). [29]

At this point in her article she begins to move in the direction of considering that research with children is not merely a matter of "discovering" their worlds from their perspectives, but *conversing/relating* with them such that the adults and children jointly construct knowledge and understanding. Furthermore, the research process is seen as linked to researchers caring about the children's "wellbeing". It is not clear from her account whether she believes this wellbeing can be nurtured already during the research encounters (so that the children can feel enriched through having participated in the research), or whether her idea is that insofar as their voices are heard, policy makers making policies relevant to children will take seriously the "data generated by children" (§37). Her reference to "data generated by children" however, runs counter to her statement that the

"data" generated are a product of a dialogical encounter (with adult researchers) in terms of a dialogical conception of language (and a performative one). [30]

I would suggest that here again a conception of the performative character of the research process means that in any encounters with children, adult researchers need to be mindful of how the words used during the research process might affect the development of the dialogue. This is how SCHMALENBACH, inspired by MERTENS' transformative approach (SCHMALENBACH & KIEGELMANN, 2018, §30), engaged with the participants by trying to avoid deficit language (see Section 2 above). This to me implies a *relation-centred*, rather than a child-centred understanding of the research process as possibilities for ways of seeing reality become co-construed during the research process. [31]

The child-centred "movement" in qualitative research, seems to be largely based on the idea that child-centred methods can be used to understand children's (pre-existing) views and experiences, existing outside of the research encounter. This is iterated by JORGENSEN and SULLIVAN in their article "Accessing Children's Perspectives Through Participatory Photo Interviews (2010). They state that their quest was to "enhance the child's ability to communicate his or her perspectives to the adult researcher" (§1). Nevertheless, they admit that:

"[a]lthough child-centered methods may offer a more congruent choice than traditional interview techniques for apprehending children's lifeworlds, they also present interpretive challenges insofar as the meanings of the responses are contingent on *how* children construe the research task and *how* they react to the researcher" (§2). [32]

JORGENSEN and SULLIVAN consider as "challenging" the fact that children's responses may express a reaction to how they interpret the research task and the researcher—rather than appreciating as researchers that the data can be *admitted to become generated as the children respond to the task (as interpreted)*. In relation to their research, they state that: "Our request that the children photograph family members working and playing with technology was designed to draw their attention to human-object transactions" (§16). Here they recognise that the research, seen from their own perspective, was *intentionally designed to draw the children's attention to something of which they may not have been as aware before the research encounter*, namely, "human-object transactions". That is, the research had an intentional performative function of *rendering the children more attentive to this*. [33]

Considered in this way, the researchers arguably took some responsibility for the manner in which the "task" was explained to the children, and the children responded accordingly. The researchers note that "family scenes" may have been staged for the camera, which means that some of their images were "contrived" (§25). But again, seen from another angle, it means that this was important to the children, and also provides insight into (potential) use of household technology. [34]

Explicit examples of admitting some responsibility (and considering that researchers and participants are co-responsible for the "data" generated) can be located in the work of those who focus on what it means to speak of cogenerative dialogues during the research process (STITH & ROTH, 2006). Authors who focus on the dialogical character of research (and of social life) accept that "findings/results" should not be considered as a "representation" of prior views/experiences or social processes supposedly existing "in" social reality, but as formed through a dialogue in which researchers with various groups of participants, are involved. STITH and ROTH note that they explicitly brought to certain research situations (exploring co-teaching) the idea of "cogenerative dialogue" as a way of researching classroom interactions, while also inputting into them. They discuss this in the context of offering an account of how we (as humans) are (and can become more) connected, as we engage in cogenerative dialogues. They regard "cogenerative dialogue" as an "ideal tool to instigate interaction and participation among the participants in classroom research: students, teachers, and researcher" (Abstract to the article). They note that "the theory and praxis of cogenerative dialogue can be conceptualised as a research and praxis-improvement activity" (§1). Already in its conceptualisation it implies an intention to improve social (in this case classroom) practices. In considering the ethical obligations of researchers, they do not see these as implying a commitment to "find" individual (or even group) perspectives, but as enabling the generating of shared perspectives which can lead to enriched ways of seeing and acting. Like other language theorists who do not see language as "representing" realities but as invitations to dialogue, they argue (citing a number of authors) that words become meaningful through interactions in which the performativity of words requires others to "complete" the moves made by the initial speaker:

"The person initiating the speech act assumes a response from the other that will lead to successful completion of the act and thus both are responsible for its completion (BAKHTIN, 1993). This is in line with the responsibility that we all have as 'beings' in a world full of other 'beings', or our responsibility to the 'other' (LEVINAS, 1998). Our own being in the world already includes other beings in the world—self and other, subjectivity and intersubjectivity, self and world all emerge at the same moment: being inherently is being singular plural (NANCY, 2000)" (STITH & ROTH, 2006, §3). [35]

STITH and ROTH suggest (as do the Indigenous authors to whom I referred in my Introduction) that "self and world" are not separable—we need not uphold a distinction between a so-called knowing "subject" and a known "object" that is posited to exist independently of how we create meaning in our relationships with each other and with perceived realities. We *exist in relationship*—and this can be more or less consciously acknowledged (and lived). From this ontology springs the ethical claim that we are co-responsible for trying to generate more "solidarity". As they explain: "Solidarity is not something that can be quantified but is rather evident from the behavioural change of the participants, how do they identify the range of 'us'" (§5). This is similar to authors who argue that *Ubuntu* is a concept that is difficult to define, but which manifests as people practice "we-directed" styles of living (QUAN-BAFFOUR & ROMM, 2015, p.460). [36]

In explaining the role of the "researcher" in the quest to nurture solidarity, STITH and ROTH (2006) indicate that this clearly cannot amount to researchers trying to act as "voyeurs" viewing (in this case) classroom interactions from some kind of distance, and trying not to intervene therein. They explain that "voyeurism" as a research practice "is counterproductive given the intention of the dialogue to make sense collectively and democratically" (§9). The researcher's role is to find ways of trying to forward cogenerative sense-making (admitting that the moves made by initiating researchers to encourage such dialogue depend on the responses of others involved). [37]

Like Indigenous authors, their account of the obligations of researchers stems from an ontology that posits that we "are" connected and "are" responsible for one another. The status of these claims, is however, not that they represent what "really" is (that is, that humans *are* "singular plural") independently of people finding the statements about our connectivity meaningful (so that these statements resonate with them). Put differently, the ontological claim itself has a performative function and requires others to respond, so that it becomes "completed". The *statement about human relationality requires that this makes sense to people in definite contexts of interaction*. MOLEFE explains this from an African perspective, also noting that by saying that reality is defined in terms of relationships, the "entire cosmos" is included (and not just human being), insofar as people "think" and "feel" connection.

"Reality itself is defined in terms of relationships, all-inclusive relationships. ... Africans are traditionally characterised by a holistic type of thinking and feeling. ... They regard themselves in close relationship with the entire cosmos. In the same light Felix MUROVE, an African philosopher from Zimbabwe, argues that African ethics arises from an understanding of the world as an inter-connected whole whereby what it means to be ethical is inseparable from all spheres of existence" (2014, p.128). [38]

The implication of all of this is that instead of considering that research involving children should be named as "child-centred", we may better name it as *relation-centred*. This would highlight the participation of initiating researchers (which contributes in various ways to the forming of the data that become generated). And by calling it *relation-centred*, it is also implied that many relationships are involved (as by implication discourses generated in the research context can be carried into other social contexts including contexts of interaction with "nature"). This would also cater for EMDIN and LEHNER's (2006) point that a potential "insularity" (§14) can become avoided whereby participants might see themselves as part of one community (in this case this particular classroom or school) without considering their connectivity to wider communities and indeed, I would add, to nature as part of our community. [39]

Finally, in conceptualising what a relation-centred approach might mean in the practice of research (with children or with adults), I refer back to the arguments of certain qualitative researchers regarding what they see as a challenge in finding "authentic" views and their attendant attempts to reduce what is called "social



desirability". For this purpose, I refer to the work of RIZVI (2019), who used vignettes as a frame to elicit comments from British-Pakistani mothers who worked with schools to support their children with special educational needs. RIZVI tackles the question of "authenticity" and of "social desirability" from angles which I would regard as more suited to a performative, relation-centred research approach. Briefly put, she poses two methodological questions, namely: 1. "Are authentic representations useful and straightforward measure of vignette's effectiveness?" And 2. "Do reduced socially desired responses reflect the effectiveness of a vignette?" (Abstract). She suggests that her supplied (fictional) vignettes for participants to engage with were meant to "promote reflective thinking within participants", and "arrive at their own understanding of what should transpire in the vignette" (§3). The frames embedded in the vignettes were meant to be frames of reference to "elicit comments" from the women. The aim was not for her as researcher to arrive at "a singular representation of an authentic voice" (§1), but to become a stimulant for the women's continued reflection on issues raised. [40]

Regarding the question of how as researchers we can reduce participants' possible desire to respond in terms of social expectations (the social desirability effect), she suggests that participants can be encouraged to engage with the fictional vignettes and offer "advice" to the characters, and that the researcher can concentrate on "participants' views on the different issues presented within the vignettes" (§33). The intention of RIZVI was not to try to determine "if participants were providing truthful answers", which sets up a false binary between "truth" and "fiction" (§28). The idea was that the vignettes could become "a medium for participants to engage in active meaning-making" (§11). Hence, she notes that she was not concerned with "trying to eliminate social desirability", but more with setting up a relationship with the participants which would magnify their "dynamic process of making sense" (§36). She concludes her article by noting that from a critical feminist framework (which she admits guides her research):

"Surely claiming to know what a participant is thinking when responding is antithetical to the reason why a researcher chooses to work with a critical feminist framework. Equally problematic is assuming what participants might perceive as socially unacceptable or acceptable responses, since individuals can have very different opinions about various issues" (§38). [41]

RIZVI propounds that the use of qualitative research gauges to judge research such as the ability to tap into "authenticity" and reduce "social desirability" of responses, are not fit for the ethical purposes that she was advancing in the research work with the women (§39). Otherwise put, the aim was more to enable (critical) reflection as part of the research process. Likewise, in research with children, we can focus on their competences to offer commentary on issues being brought up for discussion (with researchers taking some responsibility for words used by them too during the research process). The (ethical) stage is now set for me to proceed to the example of the research encounter that I initiated with the children in the school in South Africa. [42]

#### 4. Brief Background to My Involvement With the School

In this section I outline briefly the community-engaged project of which I am part, as member of a department in the College of Education at the University of South Africa, which has links with the school and surrounding communities. The school, named Tiger Kloof (which the director is pleased to be named and acknowledged in research write ups) is situated in a town called Vryberg in the North West Province of South Africa. One of my colleagues (who leads this particular community-engaged project—here nicknamed Arko) is a past deputy principal of the school. He was asked in 2015 by an alumnus of the school (Lesego SEROLONG), who was establishing a co-operative rural development project in a nearby village, if our department could offer literacy and numeracy training to the potential farmers whom she wished to train in sustainable farming practices. Due to the legacies of apartheid in South Africa, many of these adults lacked functional literacy, as they had not had the benefit of being schooled during the apartheid system. (This was despite a successful literacy program introduced by the new government that did manage to render literate 4.7 million learners; but some had still been "left behind".) Through the support of the community engagement directorate at our university, literacy training was effected for the potential farmers (ARKO-ACHEMFUOR et al., 2019). [43]

When a team from our department together with an affiliate visiting from South Australia (Janet McINTYRE-MILLS) spoke to the director of the Tiger Kloof (TK) school in July 2018, she told us of the work of this alumnus (Lesego) in the communities and also of Lesego's continued liaison with the Grade 8 and 9 Geography teacher and farm manager at the school (Maxwell MASASI). She mentioned to us that Maxwell (as later was re-iterated by him when we conversed with him) focuses on care for the environment, a care which he tries to encourage in others. In July 2018, in our one-and-a-half-hour interview/conversation with Maxwell, he explained to us, inter alia, how at the school he is currently running the farm with volunteer children from the school who are part of his "environmental club" (which in 2018 had 52 children from various grades), along with running a Junior Land Care program for neighbouring schools (apart from teaching geography for the Grade 8 and 9 school children at TK). [44]

He went on to emphasise the importance of heeding climate change (CC) warnings. He expressed concern that some countries refused to sign the Kyoto protocol because they "valued the monetary aspects more than the environmental aspects". And he stated that "Trump is not for the environment: he thinks it is madness among scientists". But he said that as far as he can tell, he foresees many more environmental refugees—as people will have to escape the disasters of CC. So, by avoiding taking climate issues seriously, the problem "just shifts to another person". What he tries to suggest to the children with whom he comes in contact in the school and beyond, is that "you are part of this" and that "denying does not solve the crisis". He then told us a little more about how he sees the work of the alumnus referred to above (Lesego) and how she became involved in villages in the North West province—setting up meetings to discuss

problems in the communities and viable solutions, with sustainable farming as part of a multi-pronged solution to food security, unemployment and poverty. [45]

In October 2018, Arko and I visited one of these communities. On our way back to Pretoria we visited TK. After speaking briefly to Maxwell about, *inter alia*, how his work with the children was going, I mentioned that I had an exercise which I thought could be fruitful for some of them to participate in doing—based on scenarios that had been used in the Australian context by Janet (whom he had met in July). I explained that Janet had developed the scenarios, which express different responses to CC, as part of a research project she had initiated in Australia and that the scenarios can function as a trigger for discussion. He concurred that this seemed a good idea as it would be another way of stimulating the children to think about CC responses. [46]

Arko and I then met with the director. He asked her if he could speak to the person in charge of building and maintenance at the school (in regard to a tender that we were planning to apply for, to set up a project for building biodigesters). I asked her if while Arko was speaking to him, perhaps some of the children being taught geography by Maxwell could volunteer to participate in an exercise that I had in mind—to do with CC responses. I indicated that I had mooted this idea with Maxwell. The director said she would seek volunteers from the Grade 9 geography class; and subsequently I met with them (in a classroom). I asked them why they had volunteered and they said that most of them were in the Eduplant program at the school<sup>6</sup>—some had been with it for a long time and some for less time, but this is why they wanted to participate as the topic sounded interesting. [47]

## 5. My Presentation of Myself, and the Scenarios, to the Children

I explained to the children that as a researcher I was keen to learn from them about how they considered the applicability of the scenarios that Janet had used in research in Australia, in South Africa. I indicated that I was hoping they could learn from one another too, through dividing themselves into groups to discuss (and create notes around) their joint thoughts. My way of presenting the research as a learning encounter in which we all could learn was consistent with HWANG and ROTH's (2005) point that "ethics in research on learning is a reflexive endeavor to establish a configuration of researcher-participant interaction beneficial to the development of a participant's learning activities within research activities" (§39). HWANG and ROTH give an example from their own research of a participant (a science student) clearly expecting the researcher to offer some intervention that would enable the participant to improve upon her learning, to which the researcher responded positively. HWANG and ROTH remark that at first sight it seems as if "there is something incompatible between the researcher's activities of conducting research and the participant's activities of

6 The school benefits from the Eduplant program, which for many years has been supported by Woolworths (a private sector company). Eduplant is managed by the NGO called Food & Trees for Africa (FTFA) that teaches permaculture food gardening programs in under-resourced schools (see <https://trees.org.za/the-eduplant-programme-launches-its-next-cycle-of-support/> [Accessed: January 8, 2019]).

learning science to a certain extent and it looks so indeed" (§12). But if the aim of the research is not to "find out" about static understandings but to *explore possibilities for cogenerating* understandings, the incompatibility disappears. Likewise, many Indigenous researchers argue that during the process of research there is no requirement for "researchers" to shy from sharing their understandings as part of a process of dialogue with "research participants". Indeed, MSILA (2017) argues that sharing (offering of input into the dialogue) is an African obligation. In this case, my familiarity with scenarios from my acquaintance with literature and my acquaintance through in-depth conversation with Janet (McINTYRE-MILLS) around research in the Australian context (McINTYRE-MILLS, 2014b) became "shared" with the children, as a trigger for their own continued discussion. [48]

The way I explained the scenarios, and their dividing into groups (of which they chose to divide into two groups of two and two groups of three), was as follows: I displayed the copies of the sheets of scenarios (see [Appendix](#)) to the ten children and suggested to them that they had about an hour to complete the exercise in chosen groups. I re-iterated that the exercise was meant for them to look at the scenarios in relation to CC as formulated in Australia and think together with their partners about their possible relevance in South Africa. I noted briefly that the "business as usual" scenario implies a way of thinking and living where people focus on economic aspects of life and tend to treat as unimportant the social and environmental aspects. (I had seen that the South African geography curriculum for Grade 9 referred to these three aspects when addressing "development".) I noted that the "small changes" scenario implies that people (also via government and NGO initiatives) try to embrace some change in relation to social and environmental issues, for the benefit of future generations too. And I explained that in the "sustainable future" scenario, people are even more prepared, through increased initiatives, to face up to the challenges of CC. I suggested that in their looking at Janet's outline of the three scenarios, they should discuss together their possible application in South Africa. I distributed copies of the scenarios to groups, along with blank sheets of paper and pens for their note-making. [49]

While they were busy, I kept going around the groups remarking to each one that I was pleased to see that they seemed to be working well together, talking together and making notes. After about 40 minutes had passed, I went to each group in turn asking the children if they thought they were learning from each other while doing the exercise. (I asked them if I could tape their responses so that I could remember what they had said to me, and they all agreed.) While asking them about their learning together, I was (implicitly) trying to support the practice of relational knowing, a notion that (as noted above) is supported by Indigenous scholars (e.g., ANI, 2013; LETSEKA, 2012; RIX et al., 2019), who feel that it needs to be revitalised as an epistemology due to the legacies of colonialism which have tended to denigrate this style of knowing. (Of course, as noted earlier, not all Western thought decries relational knowing, but it is the prevalence/dominance of Western traditions of "individual" thinking that is of concern.) [50]

The children engaged with the supplied scenarios by generating innovative responses in all of the groups, which, however, I will not discuss here. My focus in this article is on the relational work in their collaborating with each other and in relationship to my offering of the scenarios as trigger for discussion. As it happens, in engaging with the scenarios in their discussions and note-making, all of the learners did caution against the business as usual scenario—which they took to be dominant in the South African context—and all offered ideas for generating more sustainable futures. They also offered expressions of seeing themselves as agents together with others in the school and in the community, including by engaging their parents, in this pursuit. Due to the "moves" they made in the research space in relation to each other and to the scenarios, the research had what TONON, DE LA VEGA and BENATUIL (2019) call a "sociopolitical dimension", especially

"if we define politics as the activity that brings people together for them to be able to interpret their own existence and the world that surrounds them. In this sense politics is understood as a space to build our common sense and collective action" (p.2009). [51]

In terms of the cultural dimension, TONON et al. note that FOSSHEIM (2013) points to the need to "reflect about three principles: respect, beneficence and justice, of which every culture has different ways to express" (TONON et al., 2019, p.2010). In Section 8, I return to these principles and the manner in which they were reconfigured in the research with the children. Furthermore, I offer suggestions for a more general reconfiguration of these, in the light of developments in post-qualitative, transformative and Indigenous-oriented inquiry. In the section below, I present my way of asking the children about their learning, with their answers and my replies to them, as part of the research encounter. [52]

## **6. Asking the Children If They Thought They Were Learning From Each Other: Affirming the Practice of Collaborative Inquiry**

In this section I set out all the children's responses to me as offered when I asked them what, if anything, they thought they had learned from their partners during the group work. I went to each group in turn (after about 40 minutes had passed) and the conversations proceeded as presented below (with myself being named N and the children from the groups being named as A1, A2, B1, B2, C1, C2, C3, D1, D2, D3). I provide the actual transcript of each conversation, followed each time by a brief commentary (for readers).

### **Group A**

N: In this process of working together, do you think you are learning from each other?

A (children together): Yes.

N: Like what are you learning?

A1: She helped me to think how some people are working for change. She thought of programs that we could use [in our notes here] e.g., trees for Africa.

N: So you are reminded about programs that are happening.

N (addressing A2): And what are you learning from this lady?

A2: I learned that in our local area in the townships there is litter that is being recycled.

N: So they are recycling?

A: Yes, the municipality are recycling the plastic. I went to the municipality once; they were bringing bins for different things

N: Do you mean for bottles, for plastic and so on?

A2: She is talking about [the town called] Taung [clarifying for me].

N: This is very interesting. Please write your names for me just so that I will remember which group is on this tape, for purposes of my memory.

*Brief Commentary:* By affirming to Group A that "this is interesting", I was affirming not only that they were learning from each other but also that I was learning from them, so that this could be considered a co-research encounter, although I did not of course use this jargon. [53]

### **Group B**

N: I am making the rounds [from group to group]. I am interested to know if you are learning from each other.

B1 [on behalf of B2 too]: We are learning a lot ma'am. We are learning to share ideas about the environment. It helps us to think about how the environment is getting damaged.

N: And are you also talking about what can be done in future?

B2: Yes.

*Brief commentary:* Based on this group's notes (which I had not yet seen when I spoke to them about their learning), this was the least forward-looking group as they focused mostly on how the environment is getting damaged rather than on possible re-regenerative action. My asking them if they were also talking about what can be done in future was meant to point out that one can focus on this too. (I asked them this in performative vein to suggest/invoke a "yet-to-be" in their way of thinking about addressing CC.) [54]

### Group C

N: I am continuing on my rounds [they could see that I had been talking to the other groups]. I would like to ask you as a group if you think you are learning from each other. As I mentioned earlier, I am a researcher and I am interested in learning from you and also seeing if you are learning from each other. It looks to me as if you are working well together and sharing ideas. Can you give me some idea of what you are learning from each other?

C1: I learned that she is considerate—she is a people's person and wants to see change for the future.

C2: And she [pointing to the first one] is more a business as usual type of person but also wants some slow change; but she [pointing to the other one] wants sustainable development.

N: Pointing to that one: So you are the more radical lady: do you want to see a whole different attitude?

C3: Yes.

N: It looks to me as if you are learning from each other about different approaches.

C1, C2, C3: All nodding.

#### *Brief commentary*

With this group I affirmed that they could learn from each other by considering the perspectives of each other in relation to dealing with CC—so that learning together does not imply that everyone has to agree, but rather that perspectives are listened to and discussed. [55]

### Group D

N: It is great that you are working so well together and also making lots of notes. But now you need to wrap up as Arko [who was having a meeting with the building and maintenance manager] is soon going to be waiting for me to make our way back to Pretoria. I see you worked well together: what do you think you are learning from each other?

D1: We are talking about what some of us think about the environment of South Africa. We are coming up with different ideas. We are also thinking about how we can include our parents.

D2 [summarising and clarifying]: We are thinking about how as South Africans we can change the environment of South Africa.

N: So you are thinking about how we can make a difference.

D3: How we can encourage people to improve the environment.

D1: I learned about how to work as a group.

N: O, how to organise a group—you learned about group work to change things.

D2: We also thought of some statistics of people who would subscribe to each scenario.

N: So you thought of that too. I need to remember which group has said what—I will remember that you are the group who wrote your notes in red writing so I will connect up this tape with you!

*Brief commentary:*

With this group I affirmed the language of "we" that they were using as they spoke to me, as well as the implied language of "collective agency": For example, after D2's initial statement, I said: "So you are thinking about how we can make a difference"—thus strengthening (while slightly modifying) D2's way of speaking, while keeping the word "we". D3 added that they had been thinking together about "How we can encourage people to improve the environment", and D1 said that she had learned how to work in a group. My response that "O, how to organise a group—you learned about group work to change things", at that point was that I interpreted D1 as meaning that she had learned about how people can through collective effort work to improve the environment; although looking back at her statement, she may have been referring to the work that day (the group work of the three of them). But, in any case, my response will have covered both meanings—and may have inputted this perspective into the meaning of the statement (as statements can have evolving meanings depending on how they are interpreted). [56]

I then turned to addressing all ten children:

Arko is now waiting to go back to Pretoria—but I am so pleased that you all found this a useful exercise. I will learn more from you when I see your notes. I am also pleased I asked you all what you learned from each other. It is good that through the exercise everyone is developing. Now we must close up. But thank you all for participating so nicely. And now I must leave! [57]

## **7. Some Feedback to the Geography Teacher**

For purposes of "completing" my storying around the circle of relations with the prime players in the story, it should be noted that in May 2019 when I returned to the children's notes and the tapes for the purposes of writing this article, I realised that I needed to clarify a few points of detail with Maxwell regarding his involvement with these students and also that I should give him some feedback. I therefore wrote him an email and followed it up in a phone call (after he suggested that I should feel free to call him). In our exchanges I got clarity from him that he was indeed the full-time geography teacher for the Grade 9 students and that he teaches the whole geography course. I had indicated via email that during my encounter with some of the learners in October 2018, I had been "trying to getting a sense of how the learners are thinking about environmental issues and also how they think together about this (during group work)". I commented to him in the same email that: "The learners' thoughts (and feelings) are very interesting and shows they are aware of environmental issues and their importance, and they enjoy talking about the issues". In our phone call a few days later (of which I took some shorthand notes) he said to me that he tries to emphasise during the classes and also during the farming activities "the vulnerability of the environment". He tries to infuse "a good environmental ethos into the syllabus" and he suggests that "we work with nature". He said this is not quite how the syllabus puts it, but he adds this into the syllabus. I replied to him



that some people call this a "parallel curriculum"—where one includes discussions around values, including the value of caring for "mother nature". I was thinking here of the work of McKAY (2017), writing about what she calls a "parallel curriculum" (p.97). McKAY argues that through a parallel curriculum, which operates alongside the formal curriculum, Ubuntu-styled ways of living can be fostered. I thus placed (for him) in wider educational context his attempts to add into the official curriculum. He replied that some of the children who have graduated from the school and have been to university have said to him "thank you for that; that was a good start for my understandings". But he remarked too that "not everybody appreciates this [way of thinking and living] at the moment". [58]

## **8. The Three Principles of the Belmont Report Revisited**

I now turn to a detailed consideration of the principles of the Belmont report, to which I have pointed in previous sections. The report proffers three principles: respect for persons, beneficence, and justice. I turn to each one respectively. [59]

### **8.1 Principle 1: Respect for persons**

According to the authors of the Belmont report, this principle contains two "ethical convictions" (NATIONAL COMMISSION, 1979, p.4): The first is that individuals "should be treated as autonomous agents" and the second is that "persons with diminished autonomy are entitled to protection" (ibid.). This principle becomes translated in research practice into the need for researchers to seek informed consent, as follows: "Respect for persons requires that subjects, to the degree that they are capable, be given the opportunity to choose what shall or shall not happen to them. This opportunity is provided when adequate standards for informed consent are satisfied" (p.6). [60]

The authors of the Belmont report suggest that "not every human being is capable of self-determination" (p.4) in the sense of being able to determine/judge whether they should participate in the research that is being proposed. They suggest that (some) children could fall under this category, insofar as they are considered not yet mature enough to make such judgements. And other categories of people, such as the "mentally disabled" or people who are in social circumstances "that severely restrict liberty" are also classed by the authors as perhaps not being "capable of self-determination" (ibid.). They state therefore that these people may need some protection from being asked to participate, as they may not be equipped to decide what they are consenting to. They note that "the extent of protection afforded should depend upon the risk of harm and the likelihood of benefit" (ibid.)—with IRBs being tasked to help make these judgements. As noted earlier, many qualitatively oriented authors are critical of the way which "protection" is conceived within the medical framework of the Belmont report, arguing that this in effect means that subjugated social groupings' perspectives can become excluded from being explored (MARTINO & SCHORMANS, 2018; VAN DEN HOONAARD, 2018). This also means that insofar as they *are* included, how researchers are "allowed" to engage with such (socially marginalised) participants, may work against regarding them as

competent to reflect critically on social issues (and on the way in which the discourses in society continue to render them, along with other marginalised groups, "vulnerable"). This is the point emphasised by MARTINO and SCHORMANS (2018), and also by RIZVI (2019), which a performative social science would regard as crucial to highlight when calling for a reconfiguration of the Belmont report's ethical stance. [61]

Meanwhile, the requirements for seeking consent from "prospective participants" (those deemed capable of offering consent) as required by IRBs is subject to much contention in the research literature. Disputes arise not so much in the questioning of the importance of seeking consent from participants, but more in the fact that this practice has become too legalistic/formalistic, without consideration of the human relationships involved. ROTH (2018) argues in this regard that the "standard position" (§2) taken by institutional ethics committees is to consider the research act *theoretically*, and therefore to fail to comprehend "the actually performed act, which is once-occurrent, integral, and unitary in its answerability" (BHAKTIN, 1993, p.28, as cited by ROTH, 2018, §2). Hence, instead of consent being a process that can create trust between researchers and participants (ROTH, 2005, §7), it has all-too-often become a formalistic process asking participants to sign a form indicating that they have understood the purpose of the research and what will be required of them. In requiring that consent procedures are properly handled by researchers, CZYMONIEWICZ-KLIPPEL, BRIJNATH and CROCKETT (2010) note that "standard procedures in IRBs recommend that researchers ask participants to sign an official form, which is often accompanied by a written explanatory statement outlining details of the research" (p.333). CZYMONIEWICZ-KLIPPEL et al. express concern that the focus of most IRBs on obtaining written documentation as a kind of contract proving that the participant has been adequately informed and has consented on this basis, has to do with *protecting the institution from liability*. MAZONDE and MSIMANGA-RAMATEBELE (2007) likewise state that "the ultimate aim of the [ethics] committee is to protect the rights of participants and the good name of the researcher *and the institution*" (p.192, emphasis added). [62]

For purposes of institutional liability, a signed letter of consent seems the most "secure" way of protecting the institution from later comebacks in terms of whether consent has been obtained. But if one is concerned more with developing trusting relations with participants when engaged in research in the social field, this may not be the most appropriate way to proceed. CHILISA (2009), cautions that a signed "contract" (p.421), may be ill-fitted especially when required in more orally oriented cultural contexts, where contracts are regarded with suspicion. (At my university, recorded oral consent was eventually included as an option into our research ethics policy, after a number of staff—myself included—raised our concerns in various forums (for details, see ROMM, 2018, pp.406-413). [63]

Furthermore, as far as ethical suggestions for post-qualitative inquiry are concerned, TRUMAN (2003) offers a new angle to the question of consent in such inquiry when she makes the point that once "consent" has been attained in

terms of Belmont-type "respect for persons", researchers are *no longer required to consider their obligations* during the actual handling of the research:

"Underpinning the re-constitution of ethical guidelines and research governance [by IRBs], are a range of measures which protect institutional interests, without necessarily providing an effective means to address the *moral obligations and responsibilities of researchers in relation to the production of social research* (Abstract, emphases added). [64]

This is the point also stressed by ROTH (2006) when he refers to responsibilities to (try to) act ethically in the "moves" (§37) that we make in relation to others. ROTH also adds (as do many Indigenous authors) that the notion of "respect for persons" implies an individualistic conception of people, rather than forwarding alternative (more collectively oriented) notions of "selves-in-relation". In the case of the research with the children, consent was secured through their involvement as learners in the school; and I checked with them (orally and informally) that they had volunteered, and asked them why. Their reasons for volunteering was explained as that they thought the topic sounded "interesting"—they were interested in participating in research that was seeking to re-look at social and ecological issues relating to CC. During the process of the research I felt "obligated" to try to generate relational/collaborative encounters between the children, and with me (through the presented scenarios) as collectively able to reconsider issues connected with CC. It is in this that the ethical relationship can be said to have lain—rather than primarily in the fact that some form of "consent" (in this case oral) was initially established. [65]

Likewise, in research with other so-called "vulnerable" groups (and indeed any groups/ communities who might feel marginalised in some way in the social fabric) the same considerations can apply. The ethical emphasis should be on encouraging researchers to try to *direct the research process with participants' involvement so that it offers opportunities for them to participate in developing discourses that in turn might lead to fruitful (collective) agency*. In this vein ALDRIDGE (2019) makes the plea that we concentrate not so much on the initial securing of consent, but on exploring the question of "how can PR be used effectively to enhance participation among marginalised participants [those feeling marginalised relative to other social groupings]?" (p.1920) ALDRIDGE argues that what is important for participatory inquiry is that it "draws on philosophical principles and objectives that relate to mutuality and understanding in research practices", which are "designed to promote active involvement" in the research process (ibid.). In Sections 2 and 3 above, I offered some examples (from a performative-oriented perspective) as to what such "mutuality" may involve as a matter of researchers and participants taking joint responsibility for evolving discourses. And my encounter with the children in the school, can be treated as an illustration of how responsibility can also be taken for including in our discourses the *marginalisation of nature*, such that her wellbeing can become accounted for (as advised by many Indigenous authors). [66]

## 8.2 Principle 2: Beneficence

In considering the principle of beneficence, the Belmont report refers to two general rules which "have been formulated as complementary expressions of beneficent actions: (1) do not harm and (2) maximise possible benefits and minimise possible harms" (NATIONAL COMMISSION, 1979, p.5). As indicated earlier, these rules when applied to research ethics entail that the nature and scope of risks and benefits must be assessed—by those equipped to make assessments (p.9). The authors of the report clarify that:

"Accordingly, ... risk/benefit assessments are concerned with the probabilities and magnitudes of possible harm and anticipated benefits. Many kinds of possible harms and benefits need to be taken into account. There are, for example, risks of psychological harm, physical harm, legal harm, social harm and economic harm and the corresponding benefits. While the most likely types of harms to research subjects are those of psychological or physical pain or injury, other possible kinds should not be overlooked" (p.7). [67]

In considering the application of this principle, it is evident again that the participants are not being treated here as able (with researchers in processes of collective responsibility) to develop research practices which can be experienced as enriching on individual and community levels. Many authors who have re-examined this beneficence principle from a transformative-oriented perspective argue that researchers need to show an appreciation of community needs and values, thereby *creating a research space that is likely to leave the community better off* (CHILISA, 2012; LIAMPUTTONG, 2010; MERTENS, 2009; NICHOLAS et al., 2019). This can take place during the research process, wherein together the parties can seek ways of minimising risks or potentially adverse consequences (as discussed), and maximising what are conceived as benefits of setting up the research space. Benefits can also include creating new discourses which exceed "business as usual" ways of living and being in society, including in relation to nature as part of our communities—as was attempted in the research with the children in this case. And contrary to HAMMERSLEY and TRAIANOU's (2014) argument, ethical considerations about what can be called "the good life" (or more promising futures) *can* be raised as part of the dialogues that become constructed via the research (as co-inquiry) initiative. This leads to my reconfiguration of the third principle located in the Belmont report: the principle of justice. [68]

### 8.3 Principle 3: Justice—Who ought to receive the benefits of research and bear its burdens?

The authors of the Belmont report state that the principle of justice comes into play when we ask the question as to who ought to receive the benefits of the research (the increases in knowledge accruing from the research investigation) and who ought to bear the burdens (insofar as participating in the investigation may come with associated risks). Given this way of posing the question, they suggest that this implies insisting on fairness in the "selection of subjects". They explain this as follows:

"Just as the principle of respect for persons finds expression in the requirements for consent, and the principle of beneficence in risk/benefit assessment, the principle of justice gives rise to moral requirements that there be fair procedures and outcomes in the selection of research subjects" (NATIONAL COMMISSION, 1979, p.9) [69]

They suggest that "justice is relevant to the selection of subjects of research at two levels: the social and the individual" (ibid.). *Individual* justice in the selection of subjects would require that researchers should "not offer potentially beneficial research only to some patients who are in their favor or select only 'undesirable' persons [such as, say, prisoners] for risky research" (ibid.). In addition, as they see it, *social* justice as far as selection of subjects is concerned requires taking into consideration the "appropriateness of placing further burdens on already burdened persons" (ibid.), that is, those belonging to social categories already burdened by virtue of their position in society). Thus, they explain,

"it can be considered a matter of social justice that there is an order of preference in the selection of classes of subjects (e.g., adults before children) and that some classes of potential subjects (e.g., the institutionalised mentally infirm or prisoners) may be involved as research subjects, if at all, only on certain conditions" (ibid.). [70]

In these deliberations, the understanding of "social justice" amounts to the way in which samples of participants are chosen, such that researchers refrain from selecting easy targets as classes of subjects, who then have to "bear the burden" of becoming over-researched. However, qualitative researchers who consider it important to enable the voices of marginalised/subjugated groups to be heard (e.g. ALDRIDGE, 2019; MAGUIRE, 2005; VAN DEN HOONAARD, 2018) regard the assumption that these participants should be excluded in our inquiries particularly restrictive—in effect increasingly marginalising such groupings. DENZIN and GIARDINA (2007), to whom I referred when introducing notions of care and justice as part of research ethics, make the further point that "justice extends beyond fair selection procedures or the fair distribution of the benefits of research across a population. Justice involves principles of care, love, kindness, fairness, and commitment to shared responsibility, to honesty, truth, balance, and harmony" (p.24). [71]

In the case of the research with the children, the research was geared to stimulating learning (in post-qualitative inquiry mode) with a view to imagining,

and considering possibilities for enacting, a more "balanced" approach (socially and ecologically) in our living together. The idea that the research process can be used to forward visions of relational balance has also been explored by KOVACH (2009), who argues that "there is an ethical responsibility to not upset a relational balance". Conversely, there is a responsibility to make a positive difference to the "relational balance" (p.178). [72]

The scenario exercise in which the children participated was intended (performatively) to enable joint thinking around our connectivity as humans and our connectivity with nature (to strengthen visions of what KOVACH calls "relational balance"). The children "took to" the exercise by indeed engaging with the scenarios to imagine ways of subverting the "business as usual" way of thinking and acting, which runs anathema to our social relationality and relations with nature. The research with the children offered a possibility for seeing justice in the research process as linked to the question of how people can become involved in joint inquiry in relation to social and ecological justice concerns. [73]

As it happened, in terms of the sampling of participants, the participant selection in this case can be regarded as akin to what KOVACH calls "relational sampling" (p.126), which means that considerations as to which samples to select is not a matter of researchers alone making the selection decisions. KOVACH notes that in relational sampling, "the process is more reciprocal" and is based on the felt "trustworthiness of the researcher" (p.125). In the case of the research with the children, they were aware that I had been interacting with certain members of the school (e.g., their geography teacher)—and this could also have been why they volunteered to participate (although when I asked them they did not furnish this as a reason). In any event, social justice in selecting a sample would also require that I did not conceive the research relationship as one in which the participants would be "burdened" in their participation; and the children themselves indicated here that they decided to volunteer because the topic sounded interesting. During the research encounter itself, my (performative) intent was to meet the expectation that the research would be experienced as worthwhile, in this case by my trying to facilitate the generating of "interesting" relational experiences and visions. [74]

## 9. Conclusion

I have used various examples of research—with a focus on my research encounter with the children/young people—as a springboard to advance proposals for a radical revision of the Belmont report's ethical principles (and advised practices), which not only enable better inclusion of "social scientific" (and qualitatively geared) research but also incorporate developments in *transformative-oriented, post-qualitative, and Indigenous-informed inquiry*. Such inquiry, which is explicitly performatively directed, is guided by the ethical concern to propagate relationally directed ways of knowing and living. I illustrated how the research space can be used to try to strengthen a sense of connectivity between humans and between humans and the natural world, of which we too are a part. In the discussion I brought to the fore various conceptions of relationality, while

extending the concept of relationality to include (as stressed by many Indigenous scholars) possibilities for strengthening our connectivity with "all that exists". [75]

I engaged critically with certain qualitative researchers' arguments (including those advocating child-centred research), which still work with the premise that the role of professional researchers is to develop "sound knowledge", defined as "valid" insofar as it comes to grips with authentic voices which are not unduly marred by the researcher's presence. I suggested that a *relation-centred approach* offers a different ethical starting point, which is not geared to "finding" authentic voices outside of relational encounters, or with reducing "socially desirable responses" (as if these are clear-cut). I showed what this might mean if we are to take seriously arguments that have been proffered in terms of epistemological and ethical paradigms for research which exceed the Belmont's medical model as well as any representation-directed social scientific inquiry. I used the research with the children to show up how the Belmont report's ethical principles *can be (radically) re-visted as applied to consciously performative research*, with implications also for relational inquiry with adults. Finally, as GERGEN (2009) notes, there is no (meta) perspective from which we can judge which ethical position is better to adopt—but he pleads (performatively) for us to recognise that in the light of "environmental threat", we now (as humans),

"confront a choice between productive collaboration [and the nurturing of such skills] or catastrophe. There are no land masses that are exempt from environmental threat. In effect, a viable future will depend on the collaborative capacity of the world's people's" (p.402). [76]

GERGEN thus urges us on these grounds to try to cultivate, in all social spaces, ways of knowing and living "where relational wellbeing is the centre of our concern" (p.403). [77]

## Appendix

Australian-based 3 scenarios (in relation to CC challenges) from McINTYRE-MILLS (2014b, pp.51-52)

### Business as usual scenario

We continue to believe in economic arguments that others believe ignore the social and environmental dimension. We continue to think that our way of life is sustainable and are not prepared to manage the perceived risks of climate change by changing our way of life. We attribute drought, bush fires and floods to one-off unrelated events or natural cycles, and deny that climate change can trigger rising temperatures in some areas and plummeting temperatures in others as melting ice effects the ocean currents. We do not perceive that the sea is used as a dumping ground to the extent that it no longer helps to regulate our climate.

### **Small changes scenario**

People make slow annual progress towards goals which they meet for the benefit of their children and grandchildren. People of all ages and from all walks of life who are able to join up the dots between the economic, social and environmental dimensions help to motivate movement towards a better future. We do not perceive these small changes as being too slow to sustain beyond our grandchildren, or we envisage that something else will happen by then to reverse the current trend.

Governments and non-government organisations take the initiative. They hold workshops to demonstrate how people can make a difference. They listen to the people and help local groups to respond to local challenges. Together they undertake model projects that demonstrate how it will be possible to live differently. They model different ways of thinking and through living the changes show that it is possible to balance individual and collective interests, because we are not selfish nor are we unable to create alternative ways of governing at a regional level.

### **Sustainable future scenario**

We live in an environment that can support this generation and the next. Housing is affordable and made of sustainable materials. We have faced up to the convergent social, economic and environmental challenges and we are resilient, because we live in clusters of homes, share rain tanks and solar grids that are subsidised by local governments. Our living and working areas are powered by alternative energy. The new status symbol is the environmentally friendly lifestyle. Public transport is green. Off road vehicles are no longer permitted to private citizens. They can be hired for specific tasks and the kilometres are logged. The green economy supports a vibrant job market spurred by subsidies to enable packaging goods, housing people, and transporting people, educating and entertaining the public. The carbon economy is replaced through innovative inventions. All members of the public are encouraged to share their experiences and ideas for living sustainably. The futures market has been reconstructed to take into account the air, water and earth we need to grow organic, safe food. We have thought carefully about the implications of treating people, animals and the land as commodities and we strive to care for ourselves, others (including the voiceless) and the land.

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